DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 732 RC 020 521

AUTHOR	Fishman, Joshua
TITLE	What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?
PUB DATE	96
NOTE	13p.; In: Stabilizing Indigenous Languages; see RC 020 517.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	American Indian Languages; Community Role; Cultural Influences; *Cultural Maintenance; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Role; Identification (Psychology); *Indigenous Populations; *Language Acquisition; Language Attitudes; *Language Maintenance; Language Skill Attrition; Native Language Instruction; Native Speakers; School Role; Sociolinguistics; Values
IDENTIFIERS	*Language Shift; Native Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the impact of language loss on culture and the need for developing effective strategies for language restoration. Culture is expressed through language; when language is lost, those things that represent a way of life, a way of valuing, and human reality are also lost. However, if you talk to members of a particular culture about language loss, they do not address the symbolism of the language but rather talk about the sacredness of language, the sense of kinship associated with language, and their moral commitment to language. Millions of people worldwide are making an effort to restore or maintain their native language. However, there are many more failures than successes in stabilizing weak languages. One reason is that whenever a weak culture is in competition with a strong culture, it is an unfair match. There is also a kind of resistance among cultural groups to the idea that something is happening to their language. Older people may be talking the language, telling stories in it, and doing all the traditional things in it, but they are not likely to be teaching children the language. By this time it is usually too late, because a new language has entered the picture and a new language-culture relationship has developed. Another reason why language restoration is difficult is because people frequently settle for acquiring the language not as a mother tongue, but during the school experience. Relying solely on the school for language transmission is not effective because it focuses on literacy as opposed to the life of the language and its relationship to the culture. Reversing language shift needs to include strategies directed toward family life, culture building, and promoting a sense of community. Schools alone cannot do this; it will take a concerted effort among all members of a cultural group to ensure that effective strategies are being implemented to foster language transmission from generation to generation. (LP)

What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?[1]

Joshua Fishman

ED 395 732

The first paper that I wrote in 1948 on native languages had to do with what is the impact of bilingualism on students. There were still parents then who were concerned that if their children learned another language it would ruin their English accent. If you would hear the tones of another languages every time they spoke English, how would they get a job and what would people think of them? Today, forty-five years later, we are still not "home" at convincing public opinion and the authorities that it is worth having all the languages we have today. Therefore, I want to start with this question, "What is lost when a language is lost?" It is amazing how people are uncomfortable about answering that question. I remember my mother always telling me, "When you start off a talk, make sure people know what the question is and ask a good question. A good question is worth everything." And I would say to her, "Ma, you know, Americans, they start off a conference with a joke. You have to tell a joke for people to know that you're about to speak?" She said, "Jokes? Ask a good question" That is an old Jewish tradition, if you have a good question, you have something worthwhile to worry about.

Attitudes toward language-loss depend on your perspective. When a language is lost, you might look at that from the perspective of the individual. Many individuals suppressed their language and paid the price for it in one way or another — that remaining, fumbling insecurity when you are not quite sure whether you have the metaphor right in the expression that you are going to use and you know the one that comes to mind is not from the language that you are speaking at the moment. So, there is an individual price, in every sense.

You can also speak from the point of view of the culture lost. The culture has lost its language. What is lost when the culture is so dislocated that it loses the language which is traditionally associated with it? That is a serious issue for Native Americans. We can ask it from the national point of view. What is lost by the country when the country loses its languages? We have had this very haphazard linguistic book-keeping where you pretend nothing is lost — except the language. It is just a little language. But, after all, a country is just the sum of all of its creative potential. What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are

[1]This paper is adapted from the speech given by Dr. Fishman at the first stabilizing indigenous languages symposium on November 16, 1994.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitivity, wisdom, and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life?

Today, I would like to just talk about language loss from only one of these perspectives, the perspective of the culture. Because losing your language is, technically, an issue in the relationship between language and culture. What is the relationship between language and culture? Is it like the relationship of my handkerchief and my trousers: you can take it out and throw it away and put another handkerchief in? Or is there some kind of more substantive relationship between a language and culture? Even there, there are various perspectives. There is an "outsider," often disciplinary, perspective as we anthropologists and linguists sit and think about it. When we consider the relationship between language and culture, it occurs to us as outsiders, not being members of those cultures, what the relationship might be and then we try to gather insightful comments, even from the outside. There is a kind of lexical or, I would say, an indexical relationship between language and culture. A language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones, the concerns, artifacts, values, and interests of that culture. That is an important characteristic of the relationship between language and culture, the indexical relationship.

It is not a perfect relationship. Every language grows; every culture changes. Some words hang on after they are no longer culturally active. "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey." Well, who knows what a tuffet is any more, and you can not find anybody who knows what curds and whey are any more without doing research. Those are frozen traces. Even if there is often a good relationship between the words of the language and the concerns of the culture, there are more important relationships between language and culture than the indexical one.

The most important relationship between language and culture that gets to the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way. What would be left? When you are talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is the culture. That is, you are losing all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about.

There is another deep relationship between language and culture, the symbolic relationship. That is, the language stands for that whole culture. It represents it in the minds of the speakers and the minds of

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC 020521

outsiders. It just stands for it and sums it up for them — the whole economy, religion, health care system, philosophy, all of that together is represented by the language. And, therefore, any time when we are at outs with some other culture, we begin to say snide things about the language. "Oh, it sounds so harsh. And it sounds so cruel" because we think its speakers are cruel or it sounds so poor or it sounds so primitive because we think they are primitive. The language symbolizes for us the whole relationship.

Actually I do not care much for this presentation of the outside view that I have made to you. It is a highly intellectualized abstraction. If you talk to people about what the language means to them, if you talk to members of the culture, they do not mention indexicality. They do not say anything about its symbolism for the whole ball of wax. They talk in totally different terms. And this tells you what they think they lose. They tell you some things about the sanctity of the language. Sanctity is not a little thing to throw around. At least, I have never felt so. Now sometimes you do not exactly mean holy — holy, holy, holy. But nevertheless, when people tell you that there is a cultural view of how that language came about, that it came to be when the earth was created, when the worlds were created, when heaven and earth was created, when humanity was created, they are giving you what you might think of as a myth, but the importance of it is beyond its truth value. That is actually the definition of a myth — something that is so important that you hold on to it because it has an importance beyond its truth. They may have the view that it was created before the creation of the world, as white fire or black fire. Every time the Lord spoke out, it came out as white fire or black fire in their own ethnocultural letters. That may sound ridiculous to you, but it is a sense of sanctity. People tell you things like that; ordinary people in ordinary Native American groups will tell you things like that. They will tell you things that have to do with the great Creator. They will tell you about the morality that is in the language. Morality is, after all, just sanctity in operation. The things you have to do to be good, to be a member in good standing, to meet your commitments to the creator. Some languages that are holy in themselves, and other languages have brought holy thoughts and holy dictums and holy commandments. People tell you metaphors of holiness. This is the most common thing, the most common expression of holiness that people tell you about their language. And that means they are going to lose the metaphor about the language being the soul of the people The language being the mind of the people. The language being the spirit of the people. Those are just metaphors, but they are not innocent metaphors. There is something deeply holy implied, thereby, and that is what would be lost. That sense of a holy, a component of holiness that

pervades people's life the way the culture pervades their life, through the language.

Another dimension of what people tell you about when they tell you about language and culture is why they like their language, why they say it is important to them. They tell you about kinship. They tell you that their mother spoke the language to them, their father spoke the language, their brothers, the sisters, the uncles, the aunts, the whole community. All the ones who loved them spoke the language to them when they were children. Just before their mother died she spoke the language to them. All the endearments, all the nurturing, that is kinship is tied into a living organism of a community by people who know each other, and they know they belong together. That is what the old sociologists call "gemeinschaft." We belong together. We have something in common. We are tied to each other through the language. That precious sense of community is not a thing to lose just as is the sense of holiness. Woe to the people who have lost the sense of holiness, where nothing matters, and woe to the people who have lost a commitment one to the other. And that is what people tell you about when they tell you about their language, and that is neither the anthropological nor any other exterior view of the relationship between language and culture. It is not an intellectualization, because it is so emotionally suffused and focused on the internal experience.

Another thing people tell you about their language is that they have a sense of responsibility for it. They should do something for it. That is a rarer, but not altogether rare, aspect of what people tell you about their language. "I should do something. I should do more for it. I haven't done the right thing by it. I'm glad I'm working for it," as if there were a kind of a moral commitment here and a moral imperative. It is a value. It is kinship-related. And, if I am a decent person, I owe something to it for what it has given me — love and nurturance, connection.

These three things taken together, this sense of sanctity, this sense of kinship, and this sense of moral imperative, are not a bad componential analysis of positive ethnolinguistic consciousness. People are positively conscious of their language, without having taken a course in linguistics to spoil it for them, to intellectualize it for them. When they are positively ethnolinguistically conscious, they tell you deeply meaningful things to them. That is what they would lose if they lost the language. They would lose a member of the family, an article of faith, and a commitment in life. Those are not little things for people to lose or for a culture to lose.

And so, therefore, it is no surprise that the generalized topic of this conference, "reversing language shift" or "stabilizing indigenous languages," represents an ideal for literally millions of people on all continents. That is a good thing to realize. Small Native American

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

communities might think that they are the only ones out there in the cold that have to worry about this. That is not so. There are millions upon millions of people around the world that are working for their language on all continents. In Europe, Irish, Basque, Catalan, and Frisian, just to name obvious cases, are threatened.

I remember when I was in Egypt, a Copt coming up to me and, realizing what I was interested in (people have to feel you are sympathetic before they tell you deeply painful things), told me how they were working on reviving Coptic and had made little books for their children in Coptic. He wondered if I wanted to see them. Coptic has not been spoken vernacularly for thousands of years and they were trying to revive it. I also had conversations recently with Afrikaans speakers. Now that South Africa has set apartheid aside, the language most likely to suffer is Afrikaans. English is going to be the link language. Nine or ten other African languages are going to be declared as national languages. The language that will probably come out holding the short end of the stick is the language of the previous regime, the language that has a symbolic association with apartheid. That is not the only symbolic association you should have with it; however, Afrikaans is already losing status at all levels.

In Asia and the Pacific those aboriginal and Australian languages that have survived are now having much "rescue work" being done on them. One example is Maori, an indigenous language of New Zealand. I recently met with a visitor from there who told me that there are now six hundred schools of a nursery-kindergarten, child-care nature to get children who are not Maori-speaking to be taken care of day after day by Maori-speaking older folks. There are now an increasing number of elementary schools where they are continuing Maori language instruction.

So on every inhabited continent, not just immigrant North America, people share concerns over indigenous languages. You can meet with representatives of the Greek church and of the Armenian church in the United States, and they will tell you about their efforts. They ask "Can you be Greek Orthodox without knowing Greek?" To them this is an American aberration; it never happened before in Greek history. "Can you be Armenian Orthodox without knowing Armenian?" Armenians have a saint associated with their language. That is how holy they feel Armenian is. The alphabet is of saintly, sanctified origin. But in America the question has arisen "Can you be Armenian without the language?" Spanish, which is a colonial language, has had much language loss associated with it, particularly in New York City. There is now an inter-generational study that confirms it, following up the same people and their children. "Can you be Hispanic without speaking Spanish?" It is a new question to ask, and the truth is that everybody now has a nephew or a niece who does not speak any Spanish.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Something is felt to be deeply wrong there, and the sense of loss is very deep.

So members of indigenous language communities wanting to revive languages, wanting to strengthen languages, wanting to further languages, are in good company. They are in the company of many people who have tried very hard to do somewhat similar and sometimes very similar things, and there are some successes to talk about, although on the whole, relatively speaking, it is not a good business to be in. It is never good, my mother told me, to be poor and old and sick. And it is never good to be a member of a small, weak, and economically poor culture. But we really cannot pick our mothers, and we cannot pick our cultures. If you work for your culture, you have a sense of gratification that is at least a partial compensation. And this is being done to such an extent all over the world that I think it is high time we got together to share experiences, to share failures, because it is important to know about failures and to share successes. The successes keep us from burning out. And it is important to know the failures because if you do not know the failures then you repeat them. If you do not know that something has been tried time and time again and has not worked out, then you do it yourself because you do not know it has failed and it sounds good to you. There are a number of reasons I think it is important for us to start out realizing that language restoration is, at best, a very hard job.

There are many reasons why there are so many more failures than successes in stabilizing weak languages. First of all, whenever a weak culture is in competition with a strong culture, it is an unfair match. The odds are not encouraging for the weak. They never are. Whatever mistakes are made, there is not enough margin for error to recover from them. It is like a poor man investing on the stock market. If you do not hit it off, you do not have anything to fall back on. Small weak cultures, surrounded by dominant cultures, dependent on a dominant culture, and dislocated by those very cultures, and yet needing those cultures, are not to be envied. They have undertaken to resist the biggest thing around, and frequently, they begin to do so when it is too late.

There is a kind of resistance to the very idea that something is happening to their language. "Oh, it'll pick up. Oh, it happened before. Oh, the younger generation will come around. When they get older, they'll start talking it." Doing it too late, can be too late in several ways. First of all, it can be too late biologically. That is, sometimes cultures "catch on" to that something should be done when there are no longer people around of child-bearing age. The older people around may even be talking the language, and enjoying it, and joking in it, telling stories in it, and doing all the traditional things in it, but they are not likely to have any more children. In terms of a kind of self-sustaining,

inter-generational link, it is now too late for the usual things. You might still try something, but it is like freezing an embryo and then trying to bring it back a hundred years later. There are some unusual things one can still try to do for a language that no longer has a natural generational flow, but, in most cases, it is too late because those unusual things are really very unusual and really hard to do.

It is usually too late ideologically or, if you like, culturally, by then, because a new *modus vivendi* has been worked out. When languages die, people do not stop talking. Cultures do not fold up and silently steal off into the night. They go on and they talk the new language. They go on in the other language; they work out a new relationship between language and culture. The relationship is detachable; it is dislocated; it takes a lot of time; and it takes a lot of doing to once more have a traditionally associated language, having once lost one. Meanwhile, you have another language that has already entered the tent. People have said, "Well, we can be, whatever, Chippewa, Seneca, Blackfoot, whatever, we can be it in English." That is another language-culture relationship, and, because of that new relationship, it becomes very difficult to bring back and to strengthen the old language, which is already undergoing so many stresses.

Another reason why language restoration is relatively unsuccessful, with all the commitment that I have mentioned to you, despite all the sense of holiness, despite all the sense of kinship, despite all the sense of commitment, is because people do not know what to do. It is like fighting a disease without having an idea of what to do. People generally do not understand the difference between, for example, mother tongue acquisition, mother tongue use, and mother tongue transmission. They are not the same thing. So, they frequently settle for acquiring the language not as a mother tongue, but during the school experience. By then it is not the mother tongue, because they already have another mother tongue. And schools are not inter-generational language transmission agencies. Schools just last a certain number of hours and a certain number of years and then, after that, they are over. How is the language learned there going to be transmitted to the next generation? So because of this confusion, having devoted a number of hours per week, per year, at school for a certain number of years, people frequently conclude, because the children are bright and pick up language, that they have done their bit.

But they have not started a system going that is self-renewing, which is self-replenishing because after school there are many years until that child has his or her children and could pass the language on. That is really a terribly important issue, to realize that the school itself is not going to transmit it to the next generation because the society has not set up a transmission mechanism that picks up after school. School is a wonderful agency, and a crucial agency for particular aspects

of language use, like literacy, versatility, or formality. But that is neither acquisition of the mother tongue nor transmission of the mother tongue. Finally, not knowing what to do and not having things like this clarified for them, people start altering all kinds of things simultaneously and that is about as desirable as taking all kinds of medicines simultaneously because you might hit upon one that might help you. But think about all the other things that are going on there that are expensive to do, which are disappointing when they do not work out.

So what to do is really a terribly important issue and what to do when is a very important issue. For example, you might have someone suggest,

> Listen, the most important newspaper in this country is *The New York Times*. Why do not we take out full-page ads in Navajo in *The New York Times* and that will show everybody that we've got a very decent language here. That should really clinch it. We are always using their language. Let them see our language when they open up their newspaper.

Well, it is just not the right thing to do. It is not a productive thing to do.

The most productive thing to do really depends on the stage that you are at.[1] Or the nature of the impairment or, if you like, the nature of the threat or the seriousness of the danger. Is the problem, for example, which is currently worrisome, that the mother tongue does not have recognition in the inter-ethnic work sphere? That is a problem among the Pennsylvania German (Pennsylvania Dutch) today. There is no more land to buy in Lancaster County. A good proportion of the youngsters marry and must go off to Kansas or some other place where there is still land, or they go to work in some factory in town. When they work at the factory in town, since they all know English anyway, they talk English to each other, not only to others working in the factory, and the elders are very concerned.

If that is the problem with the language, then you are in a certain stage of dislocation that is not very far from the transmission stage. Everybody may still be acquiring the language in the orthodox community as their mother tongue and using it in their regular services, but of the maybe four to five thousand languages in the world, the majority are not being used in the inter-ethnic work force. The majority even of those that are hale and hearty, so you have to see that problem in perspective.

---

[1]For a discussion of these stages see my book *Reversing Language Shift* (Multilingual Matters, 1991).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Is the problem that the mother tongue is neither used in the school nor in classroom education nor in literacy? Well, that is a more serious problem because literacy provides a community or it creates access to communication across time and space. It creates a community over time and space. We can talk to people who are no longer alive through literacy. We can talk to people not yet alive and far, far away through literacy. There is also a prestige factor when non-literate languages are in touch with literate languages, and the school is the literacy-conveying agency of this era. It was not always; it was not everywhere, but again I would like to assure you that most of the healthy languages of this world today are not (or not strongly) related to literacy and are not considered exceptionally school-worthy. That does not mean it is no problem because maybe it is a problem wherever you are. It definitely means there is support for acquiring literacy in some other language and that means you have got to be able to bear the strain between the language of literacy and the language of home, intimacy, love, and sanctity. You have to be able to bear that strain, that this one language, which is not yours, is the one of literacy and that one, which is yours, is not the language of literacy.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain minority languages when the print and non-print media are impinging on them more than ever before. If the lack of literacy in your language is a particular weakening factor, then literacy must be developed in your language. But it will not be transmitted to the next generation automatically. The funny thing about literacy, even in languages of great literacy, is that every generation starts off with zero literacy. Even though their parents are literate. I know there are two percent of parents who come from Harvard graduate schools, whose children start off literate even before kindergarten, but that is not yet a wide-spread phenomenon. Every generation as a rule starts off illiterate and has to be made literate from ground zero. That is not the way mother tongues work. Mother tongues are self-sustaining and a new generation does not wait until it goes to school to get its mother tongue. It usually gets its mother tongue at home in the community, in the neighborhood, among the loved ones — the ones shaping the identity of the child. And if that is what your language lacks, then that is a very serious problem indeed if you want to hand it on to another generation as a vernacular. But something can still be done about that. I would say even when there are no more speakers of child-bearing age, when there are no more fluent speakers, something can still be done, but I doubt whether a full-page ad in *The New York Times* is exactly what to do at any particular time.

Let us turn our attention to different kinds of things that could be tried. Some of the things that could be tried, some of the things that should be avoided. For example, do not start too high. That is *The New York Times* start. Do not start there. Do not start too far away, if you

are interested in the mother tongue being self-sustaining. Do not start too far away from things that have to do with home, family, and community on an inter-generational basis. That is where a mother tongue or vernacular is handed on. Particularly do not start too far away if you are weak and your language is about to crumble because it might crumble in another generation while you were paying attention to full page ads in *The New York Times*.

When Hebrew was being revived — a very unlikely success story — it had not been spoken in two thousand years, and those who knew the language best were opposed to its vernacular use. It was revived through terminologies, first by working out terminologies for carpentry and for kindergarten. Very close to what you need to have for every day, what adults needed every day and what teachers needed every day with those new children who were going to be the first children to be given the language very early, but not by their parents because their parents did not speak it. Rather by the few teachers who had learned to speak it. They were the ones to whom the children were entrusted. Children did not live with their parents. They lived in the children's home in a kibbutz with those teachers, the few teachers who had forced themselves to learn how to speak it, not naturally but fluently. They needed a vocabulary for kindergarten, and the parents needed a vocabulary for carpentry. So, start low. Start exactly where the mother tongue starts and try to aim at that. Even the school can help you aim at that. Another bit of advice is, do not concentrate along institutional lines. Most languages are not institutional, but informal and spontaneous. That is where language lives. Children live; they play; they laugh; they fall, they argue; they jump; they want; they scream.

When the illegal Basque schools were working under the Franco regime, they became underground schools. It was prohibited to speak Basque in public because the Basques had resisted Franco, the Fascist dictator, and had resisted him bitterly until the end. Franco got even with them. They were arrested; they were punished; they were killed; they were shot; and their language was outlawed and was laughed off the stage as vulgar, barbarous, barbaric, uncouth, and animalistic. So they had to run primary schools and pre-schools centered around resistance. They provided nursery and child care when you started school, and they provided health care for people who were afraid to visit the doctor. Because of their Basque nationalist association, doctors were afraid to treat them.

They did not institutionalizing Basque on a narrow basis. Quite the contrary, the school was a haven in the society, an underground parallel society. The schools were creating their own cultural space. Creating cultural space is very important for a language if it is to become competitive within its own culture.

I remember when the psychologist John MacNamara told a story about having studied Irish all his childhood in school. He was scolded one day by the lady who ran a candy store. He had just bought the candy from her and began talking English to his sister. "You have learned Irish all your life. How come you're speaking English? You should be talking Irish to your little sister." Later, out on the street, the sister asked him, "Is Irish really for talking?" That really did happen. It had not occurred to them that Irish was for talking. It was a school subject like geography and arithmetic. How many people go down the street talking geography or arithmetic? So a real — not institutional — social space has to be created for the language. And in the revivalist movement that Irish went through, they tried to create that space. A young adult community, a sports community, a language community for young people. All-Irish, mainly Irish, and partly Irish schools were recognized by the government, but not really very sympathetically recognized. It was a kind of tokenism. The school has to go beyond the tokenism. We must know enough to beware of tokenism. The Romansh and Friulians have an exchange program between their respective districts, all over those little valleys where they may live just a couple of miles apart but will never see each other. They send tapes to each other, so they are communicating. They send games to each other and not only that, they send games and tapes and videos home from school as family home work. Something for the family to do together, and the whole family listens to the tapes. They stay in touch that way with folks that they are not going to see as flesh and blood, talking to them and playing with them.

Creating community is the hardest part of stabilizing a language. Lack of full success is acceptable, and full successes are rare. Now that Hebrew is so well-established and vernacularized, the minister of education of Israel recently tried to open some English schools. He was attacked and raked over the coals for his efforts because some advocates of Hebrew still feel insecure. So the sense that the Hebrew language is safe has still not arrived in Israel, even though objectively it is safe. Emotional safety comes a lot later. The Franco-Canadians in Quebec are also not sure they are successful yet. They think they are suffering. The Catalans are not sure they are successful. A culture has been traumatized a long time, but it came back. So even in your lack of full success, dedicated language workers, whether they be Maoris, Bretons, or whatever, become committed to each other and therefore they are members of the community of belief.

In conclusion I want to tell you something about my grandchildren. My wife engages in laptop publishing. She publishes in the Yiddish language for our grandchildren. But let me tell you, the true lap top here is my lap and her lap and the laps of the children's mother and father. That is a bond with the language that will stay with them

after we are long gone. That is the lap top of language. And if you want that language revived, you have to use your lap also with your children or your grandchildren or somebody else's children or grandchildren. Adopt a grandchild. Adopt the grandparents. It is your lap that is part of the link to sanctity, the link to kinship, and the link to purpose. Now, in our affluent American society it turns out that one of my grandchildren already has an e-mail account. He writes messages to me to give to one of his cousins on the other coast. I go from coast to coast throughout the year because I have grandchildren on each coast. I have got to be sure that they sit on my lap during the year. So he writes to his cousin on the other coast on e-mail. He has to transliterate the Yiddish language into Roman characters because e-mail only works in Roman characters, and he makes a lot of mistakes in that. But it is recognizable. He is only seven, and the last e-mail I received was a little note saying, "I have got a little mechanical bird. It speaks Yiddish. Ha, ha. That's a joke."

So there are family building, there are culture building, and there are intimacy building prerequisites for language fostering, things that you have to do because no school is going to do them. However, the school can put that on the agenda of what has to be done. The school has intellectuals in it. The school has a building, a budget, a time, and a place. Now it has to put the life of the language, not just the literacy of the language, not just the grammar of the language, not just the lexicon of the language, but the life of the language in the home and the community on its agenda if the language is going to be passed along.

Reversing language shift is a research field, it is an applied field, it is a cultural values field, it has new horizons, there are new things to do, things that are, if you like, differently focused than the ordinary school has been. And reversing language shift asks, "What happens with the mother tongue before school, in school, out of school, and after school?" so that it can be passed on from one generation to another. I started with a good question and I am ending with a good question and that is the question. "What are you going to do with the mother tongue before school, in school, out of school, and after school?" Because that determines its fate, whether it is going to become self-renewing. That is my question for you, no joke!

BEST COPY AVAILABLE